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ABSTRACT

Children require a variety of skills to cope with the stresses of growth and development, including the ability to think independently, to make choices, to solve problems effectively, to communicate clearly, to develop and maintain high self-esteem, and to prevent injurious events. These life skills are best learned through curriculum-centered instruction from the pre-kindergarten through high school level, using an integrated developmental approach. The component areas of such a curriculum would address: (1) love; (2) trust; (3) choice; (4) managing perception; (5) language; (6) expectations; (7) anger; (8) guilt and shame; (9) learning to live in the present time; (10) success; (11) mistakes; (12) risk-taking; (13) responsibility; (14) community; and (15) laughter. Each of these areas of learning has a direct impact on the ways in which children pass into adolescence and adulthood. Early and consistent intervention, along with long-term follow-up care and evaluation, will prevent the development of negative patterns and low self-esteem in adolescence and adulthood. (MDM)

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CRITICAL ISSUES IN PREVENTION OF CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT--

ADOLESCENT PARENTING

LIFE SKILLS FOR CHILDREN

CHAPTER NINE

Skills for Living: The Requirement of the 90s

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The hope and goal of parents and teachers alike is that children will reach adolescence, and subsequently adulthood, with the ability to cope successfully on a psychological, emotional, intellectual and social level; that they will avoid risk and injury at their own hands or those of another; and that they will recover quickly and effectively from damaging incidents which we are unable to prevent. This hope is increasingly threatened by the barrage of attention to issues such as child abuse, substance abuse, teen pregnancy and suicide, all of which seem to be on the rise despite our best efforts. This paper will discuss the skills children need and how best to teach them in a school setting.

Children require a variety of skills to cope with the stresses of growth and development, the foundation for which is established in infancy and early childhood. These skills include being able to think independently, to make choices, to solve problems effectively, to communicate clearly, to develop and maintain high self-esteem and to prevent injurious events. The skills usually expand and develop as children interact with their parents, teachers and peers. However, these skills also can be learned, altered and augmented at any age with appropriate guidance and role models. In exploring the current range of problems children face, the lack of skills for successful living (in many cases even lack of skills to survive) is the tap root which must be examined.

For example, children are exposed to peer pressure all of their lives. It starts as soon as there is more than one child in any situation. Some of this pressure is toward positive behavior, some is negative in direction. Peer pressure becomes more marked in adolescence and is more frequently negative because of the normal rebellious tendencies of that period. Peer pressure toward drugs, alcohol, sex, truancy and other illegal activities is present and clearly, adolescents in large numbers participate in all of these activities.

We need look no further than our own experiences, however, to realize that most adolescents experiment with one or more of these behaviors and pass through this phase undamaged. Others become "hooked" on these unacceptable behaviors, do not survive, or are left with consequences that shape the rest of their lives. So, prevention of any form of abuse, whether at the hands of the child (e.g., substance abuse) or someone else (e.g., sexual abuse), is important.

Prevention efforts traditionally focus on the problem rather than the process by which children become enmeshed in abuse. The predisposition in current scientific and public focus, to break everything down into its smallest component parts, causes us to lose sight of the forest for the trees. There is a proliferation of groups that have a specific approach, program, theory, or solution for each of the problem areas confronting youth today. Each group focuses on only one area of prevention, offering expertise and techniques to alter behavior it considers inappropriate. This predisposition cripples our ability to be effective because the range of social and

personal dysfunction are actually individual branches of the same tree, to be managed by dealing with the root causes. We cannot begin to be truly effective until we recognize and address the integrated nature of all these problems.

Preventing abuse and personal dysfunction is a complex task related to self-esteem, self-concept, communication, decision-making and an understanding of human behavior and consequences. The decisions children make are shaped by their conceptions about their own lives and the choices made by those around them. The problems we currently see in adolescents and even pre-adolescents have evolved from decisions children made over many years. While it appears that there is a day when the abuse or dysfunction begins, the course is set long before that point.

Prevention of the great number of problems facing children today requires possession of specific behaviors, thoughts and abilities. We can now identify and appropriately begin teaching these basic life skills at the preschool level, and continue to build upon them year after year as a part of the child's overall education. With this approach, children are protected from abuse at the hands of others from the earliest possible age. When these same children get older and are presented with opportunities requiring them to make their own choices, they will be significantly more prepared to do so thoughtfully and responsibly in all areas of function.

The difference between successful "rite of passage" and failed "rite of passage" is the level of life skills each child brings to adolescence. Our goal should be the development of skills which will enable the child to reduce the likelihood of involvement in disabling, if not life-threatening, occurrences and which will permit them to recover from potentially damaging events. To establish our criteria in terms of eliminating the child's natural tendency to test the boundaries, to rebel, to experiment with the limits is unrealistic, and a formula for failure by any method of evaluation. We should rather look at how to provide the child with the best possible life skills to navigate through childhood and adolescence into productive adulthood. This is the true measure of success.

New strategies for approaching the many problems young people face must be developed. There have been recent breakthroughs in the field of child abuse, where prevention concepts have been successfully taught to children through the development of fundamental life skills. There is conceptual and behavioral implementation of strategies without direct discussion of abuse.

So, how can this massive array of problems be addressed? Life skills training may best be accomplished through curriculum-centered instruction. A pre-kindergarten through high school curriculum, using an integrated developmental approach, can provide the skills for living that children require. By maintaining and augmenting appropriate attitudes toward skills development, we assist the child's positive self-image. We also encourage healthy choices and the assumption of responsibility for those choices. This combination of skills and positive self-image helps the child to avoid abuse and chronic personal dysfunction by preventing the underlying sources of these problems.

The developmental perspective deals with the individual from his or her starting place. From whatever point we begin, patterns of success and corresponding positive feelings generated are gradually developed. New skills are built one small success at a time. It is essential that opportunities for implementing these new skills be made in small enough bites that the individual's success is insured. This is analogous to the strengthening of muscles in any athletic conditioning. No one starts running a 100 yard dash overnight without training and conditioning. Likewise, to expect individuals to suddenly acquire the ability to cope with major stress is unrealistic.

A developmentalist approach to the problems of chronic dysfunction, inordinate risk taking, self-destructive behavior and an inability to recover from painful life events recognizes certain root causes. These causes are: inability to succeed, inability to communicate, unresolved anger, unrealistic expectations and fantasies which lead to recurrent and consistent upset. The developmentalist approach asserts that these ineffective life strategies result from a lack of learned skills necessary to cope with the events of one's life. This approach further asserts that the roots of the entire range of problems, which are now threatening this and future generations of children, have a common developmental source--skills for living.

A progressive program, including basic life skills and specific content area skills, must become an integral part of school curricula in such a way that one program or curriculum thread enables children to maximize their potential.

Content area skills include the ability to:

* think, problem-solve, make decisions and choices effectively
* develop and maintain satisfying interpersonal relationships
* exercise effective communication and assertiveness
* manage personal behavior and choices
* develop and sustain resources for support and nurturance
* develop and maintain high self-esteem
* take personal responsibility for actions and choices
* set goals and work toward them with flexibility
* prevent child abuse: sexual, physical and emotional
* prevent substance abuse
* prevent teen pregnancy
* make responsible choices regarding sexuality
* effectively plan and parent their own children

Currently the school curriculum is scattered with separate and special programs when the common thread leads quite naturally to an integrated developmental approach. While each of these content areas is somewhat different, the life skills required to deal with them are essentially the same.

These skills are progressive and can be presented in a sequential model like those commonly used in school curriculums. They can and should be made available as a course of life skills education. Schools would implement this model as an integral part of developing each child's ability to make healthy choices in all aspects of growth and development.

This curriculum would impose no rules or values which could generate heated resistance in any setting. Rather, it would provide children with the skills they need to weigh the many choices everyday life presents. It would help build positive patterns of consideration, communication, and support which children would continue to call upon as they enter adolescence and adulthood.

This curriculum would omit value judgments which can backfire for both the community and the children. For example, we learned in the evaluations following the prevention efforts of the 1960s that descriptions of drugs and substance abuse resulted in higher levels of experimentation. We now know that it is ineffective to teach that substances, such as alcohol, which parents use and which adolescents will experiment with, are bad.

Children observe the behavior of their parents. The cultural message to use alcohol and other substances to feel better or to enjoy ourselves is not lost on children. Each child's decision as to his or her personal behavior, and consequences of those decisions, will be based on that child's level of ability in coping skills. True prevention will focus on the process by which those decisions are made, not on any individual, isolated decision.

The essential components of any life skills curriculum are based on the development of fundamental, generalized interpersonal skills. It should be noted that these are not new and, in fact, are the underpinnings of what many parents and teachers already do. Used to maximum effectiveness in a structured program, however, they are the context within which education and learning take place, not just another content area.

The component areas include:

Love: Loving is the foundation upon which all other life skills are based. This includes being loved, loving oneself, and loving others. Part of learning to love is encompassed in the skills listed below. This includes acceptance, forgiveness, expectations, etc.

Trust: Learning to trust begins when the young child knows that the world will respond with dependable and empathetic care. Following this, children learn to trust themselves and to extend that ability to trusting others. This is a base of fundamental security which enables risk-taking. Trust is best fostered within the home from the earliest days, but can be developed and fostered throughout childhood by other learning experiences.

Choice: Children learn about choice in the first years of life. The terrible twos are the most vivid manifestation of this discovery. Making choices is a learned skill requiring direction, work, and an evolving understanding of consequences. Learning about choice also includes understanding that failure to make a choice is also a choice. Part of choice also is finding out that one is responsible for the consequences of one's choices. This is perhaps one of the most important of the life skills because it underlies the child's perception of himself or herself and directly shapes thinking patterns.

Managing Perception: A child's sense of self is shaped not only by the input of other people but also by the child's thoughts. The power of this is only now being fully realized as new programs and research indicate that the way one presents oneself and the events that occur in one's life are shaped, in many cases, by one's perception and actions based on that perception. This is at the heart of self-concept and self-esteem development and lends itself to powerful intervention at any point in one's life.

Language: What we say and how we say it matters. Adults shape children by what they say and do to them with words. Children also have the power to shape themselves through language. What cannot be communicated cannot be mastered, so the importance of giving children the words to understand what they feel and think and an understanding of the ways in which their language and thoughts shape their perception and actions is essential.

Expectations: These are what one places as behavioral requirements on oneself, other people and society. If these expectations are not met, feelings of anger, frustration and rejection develop. Guidance in setting realistic expectations, taking responsibility for expectations, and skills for handling unmet expectations helps children maintain balance in their lives.

Anger: This is one of the hardest emotions for most people to deal with. Our cultural view is that anger should not be displayed. For children who feel angry and cannot find acceptable ways to express their anger and hurt, a pool of what can be called "generic anger" builds. This pool of anger is then tapped each and every time the child experiences another anger-producing or hurtful event, making the response of the child seem out of proportion of the event. Unaddressed, this pool of "generic anger" builds a cycle of feeling out of control, feeling unable to be responsible for the behavior generated by the anger and ultimately feeling entitled to explode at the world or at one's self because of perceived unfairness.

Guilt and Shame: Guilt is having done something wrong or a feeling of self-reproach, believing that one has done something wrong. Shame is a painful feeling of having lost the respect of others because of improper behavior. Understanding the difference

between the two is important to the management of these feelings and their effects. Guilt is something which tends to be imposed and used by other people. Shame is something that tends to be internal and usually concealed, but which threatens self-concept and self-esteem. Children can learn to realistically assess feelings of guilt and shame. They also can learn to address the source of those feelings and to manage them through communication and the reshaping of expectations.

Present Time: Living in the present is all that is really possible for any of us. When children develop the habit of wishing they could return to an earlier time or change their past or when they become preoccupied with what they want in the future, they diminish their ability to live in the present. They also deny themselves the joys of living life's journey. Learning to accept the past and to embrace the future as it arrives is a valuable life skill which enables balance and satisfaction.

Success: The skill of structuring situations and events to enhance success is one of the most important life skills. Realistic expectations and positive perceptions are part of the framework of success. The world cannot make one a failure. Only the individual can create this feeling. Teaching children how to enhance their own likelihood of real and perceived success is an on-going process which has positive carry-over into every arena of life.

Mistakes: The only people who make no mistakes are those who do nothing. Children need to make mistakes, learn from them, forgive themselves for making mistakes and then embrace the next opportunity to learn again. But this is not easy in a world that seeks perfection. Children need to be taught to value their own worth and to resist the urge to diminish themselves because of mistakes.

Risk-taking: This is yet another aspect of learning and life expansion. In adolescence we tend to give it a negative connotation, but it is actually the way in which we stretch and shape the boundaries of who we can be. The key is putting risk-taking in the context of responsibility and choice so the risk is a considered risk, not "taking a chance."

Responsibility: While recognizing one's own responsibility for thoughts and actions is important, actually taking responsibility is another level of mastery entirely. This requires continued diligence and commitment. Responsibility is not to be confused with guilt. Taking responsibility means to recognize what one has created through thoughts or actions and to be accountable for both the direct and indirect results of these thoughts or actions. Being responsible in this way enhances one's sense of control, choice and power.

Community: Children need to have a sense of their relationship to the rest of the world. They need to feel support and be able to extend support outside the immediate family and classroom. This sense of relationship is not only healthy for its own sake, but also supports the development of the other skills and the child's appreciation for his or her impact on others.

Laughter: A sense of humor, balance, lightness, the ability to laugh at oneself and the world is an essential skill for enhancing the quality of life. It also is a learned skill which can be developed as a part of any curriculum.

Each of the skill areas is related to the other. For example, one of the cycles we frequently see is a child who perceives she/he has a lack of choice about what happens. This leads to a perception of having no responsibility for what he or she does or what happens. This is followed by anger and frustration and a feeling that "other people are doing it to me." This quickly evolves into a "victim syndrome" which compounds the feeling of no choice, no responsibility and anger/frustration. This cycle can come from low self-esteem or it can create a situation of low self-esteem. What is important to note is that intervention at any point interrupts the cycle and can enable the child to begin to reassert choice, responsibility and positive self-concept and self-esteem into his or her own life.

Each of these areas of learning have a direct impact on the ways in which our children are growing up and the way they pass through, or fail to pass through, the many complexities of this time. Early and consistent intervention will prevent the development of negative patterns and low self-esteem which are the precursors of risk.

Ideally, life skills training should be presented in a cyclical model to ensure consistent and appropriate progressive education throughout each child's development. Following is an example of such a model:

1. Early day-care and intervention for infants and toddlers known to be at risk. This provides role models for the parents and additional sources of nurturance and learning for the child.
2. Life skills and prevention education for all children from the time they enter preschool through graduation.
3. Evaluation which assesses the efficacy of the programs and targets high-risk children.
4. More intensive programming to reduce risk to these children and to raise personal skills and self-esteem.
5. Evaluation of program outcome in reducing risk factors and continued provision of special services related to reducing risk.
6. Long-term follow-up for rates of subsequent abuse and assessment of dysfunction.

7. Intervention for maltreated children which includes systems responses which do not compound the abuse.

8. Provision for treatment and subsequent prevention education for all identified victims.

9. Evaluation for the effectiveness of this intervention and provision of continuing special services designed to reduce the risk of further abuse and personal dysfunction.

10. Long-term follow-up for rates of subsequent abuse and assessment of dysfunction.

11. Parenting education during adolescence as a general pattern of intervention aimed at the next generation. All adolescents feel that they know what their parents did wrong and how to do better. This makes adolescence the most teachable moment; the prime opportunity to get a longitudinal jump on the next generation. This is accomplished by improving and augmenting the skills for teenagers which will not only benefit them, but will directly influence how they interact with their children.

12. Provision of parenting support for members of this high-risk population and follow through for newborn children until they enter the system above.

This model provides for consistent education, support and intervention in a life cycle that goes from young child to parenthood. Providing services or intervention at any point in the cycle will make a difference in the present and future generations.

This integrated approach to life skills training could be universally accepted by parents and schools. It is consistent with the parameters of classroom time and teacher skills, which is an important consideration for already overburdened educational professionals. The approach is shown to be relevant to the prevention of learning and behavioral problems from an early age, while at the same time providing skills required to prevent future dysfunction. Such a model has been demonstrated to achieve the desired effect of providing children with life skills and reducing their risk of abuse. The built-in evaluation component will monitor limitations or changing needs of the population for which it is being used.

<u>This model is well within current reach</u>; the skills and understanding are available within our communities. However, guidance and assistance in implementation and coordination of resources is necessary.

Evaluation is an essential part of any life skills program. The value of such a curriculum, as a preventive force, will be measured in the immediate value the children receive from the curriculum. It will be measured by increases in self-esteem, higher cognitive skills and attitudes as they participate in the program year after year. It also should be measured in 5, 10, and 15 year increments as the children become adolescents and young adults. The choices that they make, and actual reductions of abuse, behavioral problems, and societal problems are the only true substantive measures of such an effort.

Community support is another critical element. Enabling children to make choices, which will reduce the level of abuse and debilitating personal problems, necessitates the participation of parents, grandparents, school personnel and community members. The curriculum should be part of a local, regional and national effort to give children positive messages about themselves and their abilities.

Finally, the curriculum should be part of a larger support system providing specific and easily accessible assistance for children who need additional services. It should include intervention for children who have been abused and/or children who are identified as high-risk for substance abuse. We know enough about the risk factors and positive intervention to be effective and appropriate to the children, their families and their communities.

In conclusion, the focus of our efforts must shift in the next decade. We must bring awareness of the common source, effective intervention, predictable outcomes and measurable results to the areas encompassed by this discussion. We must develop programs which recognize and are responsive to the existing mainstream access points. This is needed to generate the human resources and participation necessary to provide accountable services which are comparable to the magnitude of the problem.

Immunization of children is a valid model for this issue. In essence, it is now unthinkable, unconscionable and unethical to allow children to go through life without immunization. It is now part of each child's birthright to be free from preventable diseases. The existing access point for children, principally the schools, is used to insure compliance. The immunization of children is no longer open to debate.

Similarly, we need to create a point of view and a model which can engage the passion and commitment of parents, professionals and the community at large to the well-being of all children. Leadership is needed to cut through the perception that the problems of childhood and adolescence are a many-headed monster. Separating programming designed to prevent emotional, physical, sexual abuse, runaways, drop-outs, teen parents, substance abusers, truants, etc. divides and defeats the purpose. The focus must be on the well-being of the complete child if prevention is to be achieved. A child who has learned appropriate life skills will deal with life's adversities and survive. Recognition of this fact will create the demand for programming and attitudes which will enable children to reach their maximum potential. This is a part of the birthright of each child--to be given the support and skills he or she needs to reach maturity with the ability to be an effective, contributing adult.